

Community support wins 'ghost'

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Against a backdrop of stories about Britain's "broken society" there are examples of community action bringing positive changes. One recent example of such community spirit is in London where 'London Citizens' recently fought for – and won – higher wages for some of the city's lowest paid.

A new study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), highlighted the 'against the odds' success of a grassroots coalition of faith groups, unions and community organisations in winning a 'living wage' for thousands of low-paid migrant office cleaners who had been struggling to support themselves and their families.

The research, led by Professor Jane Wills, of Queen Mary, University of London, arose amid concern about low levels of political participation and weak community cohesion in Britain's poorest multicultural communities. It centred on a campaign for a living wage for cleaners, spearheaded by London Citizens - a coalition of about 100 churches, mosques, labour organisations, student and community groups.

Findings from the project, which involved 130 interviews with cleaners, and campaign and coalition leaders, reveals the extent of dependence on migrant labour to keep the capital's offices clean. Contract cleaners employed in just one building at Canary Wharf were found to come from 29 different countries, including the UK. As many as 80% of this workforce were born overseas.

Many cleaners complained about wages and conditions of work in the cleaning industry, but were often more dissatisfied with a perceived lack of respect. They highlighted their experience of arbitrary and summary discipline, and night workers argued that they were largely invisible to the wider population. While they laboured to keep the city 'at work', they felt like ghosts whom no-one wanted to see.

Contrary to expectations, says the study, the cleaners have proved amenable to joining and engaging in political organisation to improve their terms and conditions of work – many drawing on their experiences of migration and strong religious faith to reinforce this decision.

A special London Living Wage Unit, established by the Greater London Authority in 2005, has calculated a separate minimum standard for workers in the capital – currently £7.45 per hour, compared with the national minimum of £5.52 for workers aged 22 years and older. A recent project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has confirmed that even a single person with no dependents, living in council housing, needs at least £13,400 a year before tax to afford a basic, but acceptable standard of living (www.minimumincomestandard.org).

The Living Wage campaign says that it has so far secured gains for more than 5,000 cleaners, working for various contractors, with several high profile employers agreeing to pay the £7.45. There have also been commitments that all new jobs at the London Olympic site in 2012 will be at the higher, living wage rate. However, it has been estimated that about one in five workers fall into the gap between the two rates.

Professor Wills said: "The work of London Citizens tells us a lot about efforts to foster community cohesion. Against all the odds, this broad-based coalition has successfully intervened in the market determining the pay and conditions of cleaners, promoting the payment of a living wage to those working in banks, hospitals, hotels, third sector organisations

and universities.

"Our research shows how prejudices can be broken down when people act together. "We met Christians working with Muslims, atheists with believers, Londoners with 'foreigners,' and young people with their elders."

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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